

Chair Thomas, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Synenberg, and members of the Ohio House Judiciary Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide opponent testimony on House Bill 249. My name is Andrew Levitt, but people around the world also know me by my stage name – Nina West.

I'm a lifelong Ohioan. I was raised in Greentown, Ohio — in Representative Oelslager's district, which is in Stark County — which I believe is also home to your district, Chair Thomas.

When I was growing up, my family was deeply involved in Republican politics. My grandfather, Robert Levitt, served for many years as the chair of the Stark County Republican Party, and he also represented the area here in the Ohio House of Representatives in the district that eventually became Representative Oelslager's.

Growing up, I attended Republican Party dinners and events with my family. I remember meeting Bob Dole, George H.W. Bush, and even a younger Mike DeWine, and I went to the 1992 Republican National Convention, with my grandfather, who was a delegate.

Because of that upbringing, I grew up hearing a lot about (what I was told were) conservative values — individual liberty, personal responsibility, limited government, and the idea that people should be free to live their lives without unnecessary interference from the state.

I heard about these traditional Republican values a lot, because, as the only boy in my generation of the Levitt family, it was clear to me I was being raised to follow in my grandfather's footsteps. Of course, there was just one problem with that: I was gay.

Coming to terms with that in a conservative community was complicated. I loved my family and the community that raised me, but I also worried that if people truly knew who I was, I might not belong in the same way, if at all.

When I went to Denison University, in Granville, Ohio, to study theater, I made a decision that I was going to stop hiding. I was going to live openly as a gay man. While I was there, the LGBTQ student organization hosted an annual drag show, and a friend and I volunteered to participate.

That experience changed my life.

Drag, for me, was the perfect bridge between my love for artistic performance and this intense desire to feel like I truly belonged to a community. It was theater. It was storytelling. It was humor, creativity, and character study.

And for many LGBTQ people back in the late 90s and early 2000s, when I was starting this career, drag performers were also caretakers of community spaces — bringing people together, spreading joy and laughter, and also taking on important duties like advocating for safer sex

practices and STI testing during what was then the tail end of the AIDS epidemic. And to this day, drag entertainers take these responsibilities quite seriously.

What started as a one-off performance in college in 2001 eventually became the career I have today. Yes, I have been doing drag for 25 years.

My character, Nina West, is my livelihood. In 2014, I was able to buy a house here in Columbus as a result of the work I was doing in drag. This is my home. Ohio is my home. I could and can live anywhere, but I live here because I believe in Ohio values.

Then, in 2018 — I got the opportunity to go on the reality TV competition, *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Since then things have just blown up — I've gotten to perform internationally, on many New York City stages, lead a Broadway national tour, and for audiences in the millions. I am living my dream — and that is because of drag.

The work I'm most proud of has been around my community. I've teamed up with other performers and our audiences to raise more than \$3 million for charity, including organizations serving children, public health programs, and community nonprofits here in Ohio. Yes, we have raised money for many LGBTQ+ causes, but we also have made it a priority to center our community at large — for organizations like Susan G. Komen's Race for the Cure, Nationwide Children's Hospital, Dress for Success, Service Relief, BESA, Ronald McDonald House of Central Ohio, among many others. As is often the standard in the drag community around the world, we have poured dollars back into our communities right here in Ohio.

So why is it Andrew Levitt and not Nina West who's before you today? Well, it's because this is a somber occasion for me — and to me drag is about joy and inclusion. House Bill 249 is about rejection and exclusion. It's about using vague legal language and cultural discomfort to try to get rid of artistic, cultural, and political expression some people don't like.

And one of the reasons I find so much sadness in this exercise — in coming here to justify the existence of my job and my craft — is that I still have a very complicated relationship with the way I was raised. Yes, on the one hand, I found the drag community to be so welcoming and inspiring because I was worried I would be rejected for who I was. But, on the other hand, there are many parts of my childhood that I wouldn't trade for the world. My parents love and accept and support me, and even though it wasn't easy for them, they've been to my shows and been there for me.

And so those values I was raised with so intentionally — that respect for individual liberty, personal responsibility, limited government, and the idea that people should be free to live their lives without unnecessary interference from the state — those are parts of my upbringing that I look back on fondly and that have helped shape who I am today. But a bill like this does exactly the opposite. Not only does it trample on the Ohio values I was raised with, it would also deny me the chance to help the families — parents and children — who, like me as a child, are a little different. Whether they're members of the LGBTQ community, whether they just love

performance, or whether they're disabled — it can be really inspirational for people who are different from others to see an artform that is affirming, inclusive, and celebratory.

So please, don't tell the next generation of kids from small town Ohio that they need to hide their light under a bushel. Tell them that Ohioans like you, like me, believe in the power of JOY, HOPE, LOVE, individual freedom. Because not only are those values of drag. They are values of our great state of Ohio. And because of those values I have had the chance to be my true self. Let them grow into their true selves too.

Please vote No on HB 249.

Thank you for the chance to testify, and I can now answer any questions you may have.